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Crop damage and control costs tally $300 per feral hog, according to research by Cornell University professor Dave Pimentel.

Going Hog Wild

Feral hogs wreak havoc in farm country to the tune of $1.5 billion

BY KATIE HUMPHREYS

Jeff Kilburn's Pittsburg, Texas, farm has become a real pigsty. Wild hogs—also known as feral hogs—have rooted, wallowed and rendered more than 200 acres of his pastureland and hay meadows unusable. If Kilburn were to shell out the $58,000 necessary to repair and replant the damaged areas, it would be short-lived. The feral hogs would soon return and mangle the land once again. "My dream is to get rich enough to build a fence around the entire farm to keep the trouble-makers out," Kilburn says.

Compared to their domestic counterparts, feral hogs are smaller and leaner. "They're grizzly looking," says Rex Martensen, field programs supervisor for the Missouri Department of Conservation. Their snouts are longer, their hair is longer and more coarse and they have straight tails and tusks.

With a feral hog population of 4 million to 5 million and rising, the running joke is there are two kinds of land in the U.S.: that which has feral hogs and that which is about to have them. They're more rampant in the southern U.S., but from 2000 to 2009, 43 states and even a few Canadian provinces reported feral hogs, meaning they have established herds or individual hogs have been seen, says Jack Mayer, a research scientist and manager at Savannah River National Laboratory in Aiken, S.C.

Texas is home to about 50% of the total population, followed by Florida, Georgia, California, Alabama and South Carolina.

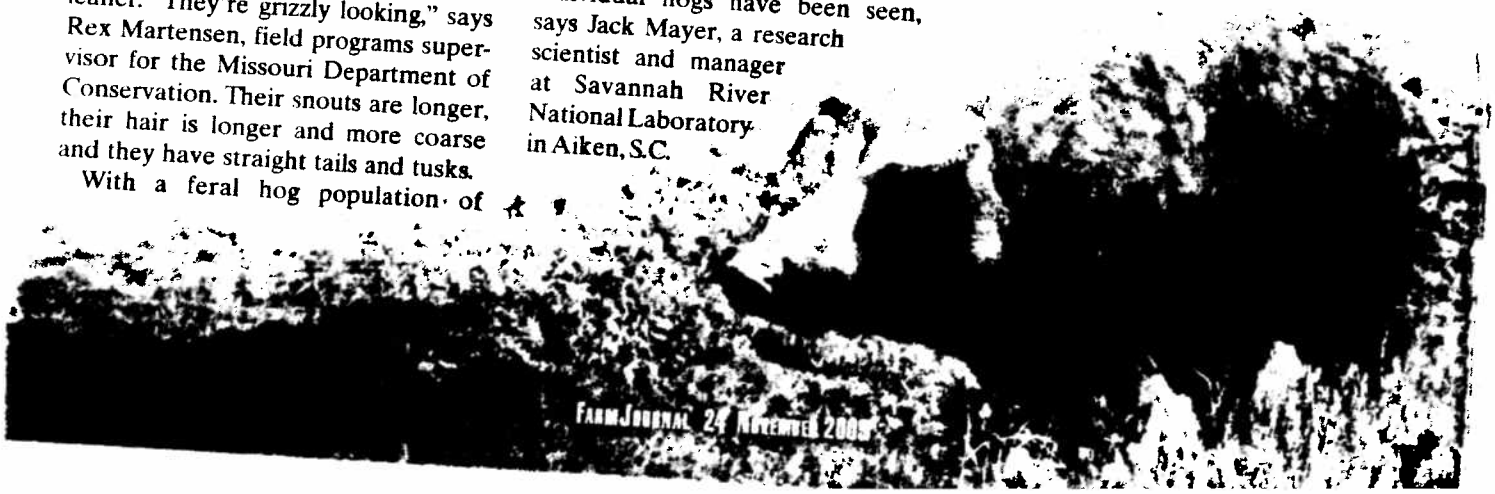
They're a hunter's prize. Based on the numbers harvested every year, feral hogs are the second most popular big game animal in North America. But don't mention feral hogs to a farmer who has stomached a slice of the $1.5 billion in ag damage they cause and the control costs they require annually.

Feral hogs root and wallow, causing damage to row crops and pastures, and "they can ruin a hay field in a hurry," Martensen says.

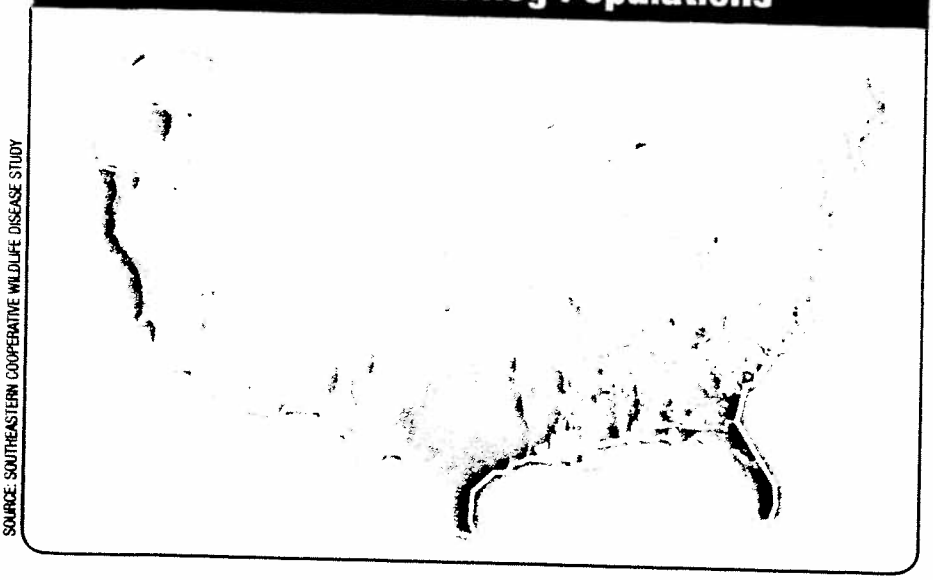
In the spring of 2007, Bannister, Mich., landowner Dallas Sutliff watched a group of feral hogs dine on a newly emerged corn field—one row at a time. The farmer who rents the ground from Sutliff replanted 24 acres of the field. A few days later, when the green shoots broke through the soil, the feral hogs were back to scrounge for more. After a second replant, the corn made it to harvest, but yields suffered after a delayed start.

Feral hogs also cause erosion, destroy fences and ponds and contaminate water. "They really aren't scared of anything," Martensen adds. "They compete with cattle at the feed trough and even chase cattle and horses and cause harm with their tusks." Feral hogs are known to carry more than 30 diseases, including brucellosis and pseudorabies.

Research by Dave Pimentel, professor of ecology and agricultural sciences at Cornell University, has found that crop damage and control costs total $300 per hog. ▶



Established Feral Hog Populations



SOURCE: SOUTHEASTERN COOPERATIVE WILDLIFE DISEASE STUDY

Without a long-term solution, the feral hog population is expected to continue to escalate.

They're the "ultimate survivor," Mayer says. They can live on anything—"plant and animal matter; they're omnivores. They scavenge for roots, worms, nuts and eggs," says Billy Higginbotham, professor and Extension wildlife and fisheries specialist, Texas AgriLife Extension Service.

Feral hogs are smart. "I've heard stories of one hog opening the trapdoor to let the captured hogs out," says Kenny Rollins, Texas AgriLife Extension agent in Titus County. "A bait-and-trap method may work one time, but it probably won't a second."

Feral hogs are physiologically capable of having as many as three litters a year, but one and in some cases two is more likely, with an average of four to six pigs per litter.

Control measures aren't as simple as loading a shotgun or setting a trap. Hunting methods and regulations vary among states and even among counties. They also depend on how the state or county categorizes feral hogs (invasive, free-ranging, etc.) and if they are on your property, someone else's or wildlife management areas.

"In most states, you can kill as many as you want on personal property, keeping gun laws and discharging firearm laws in mind," Mayer says. In South Carolina, where Mayer lives, feral hogs are the property of whoever's land they're standing on. Some states, such as California, classify feral hogs as game, and hunters have to obtain pig tags so the state can track how many are killed. Tennessee, North Carolina and West Virginia have bag limits and seasons, Mayer adds.

"Shooting, live trapping, snaring and hunting with dogs—the legal means in Texas [and many other states] to kill feral hogs—help reduce their numbers and the damage they cause, but it won't eradicate the problem," Rollins says. "Catching or shooting one at a time is entertainment; it really has no effect on the bigger problem. It's more effective to trap groups of hogs," he adds. Feral hogs are such a problem in Texas and Oklahoma, for example, that it's legal to shoot them from helicopters.

Each year a small percentage of the feral hog population is taken by sport hunting—but it's not enough to even begin to get a handle on the problem. Progress is being made on the state level, with eradication in mind. In 2007, a multi-agency task force was established in Missouri by then-Governor Matt Blunt to address feral hog concerns. The goal is to engage state and federal agencies with landowners. In many states, the department of agriculture and Extension agents host workshops to teach producers what tools are available to eradicate feral hogs.

Consistent laws. "Policy is one of the biggest hurdles as we try to be aggressive in removing feral hogs," says Kristine Brown, laboratory technician with the Wildlife Disease Laboratory, Michigan Department of Natural Resources. In Michigan, feral hogs are classified as livestock, but prosecutors in 66 of the 83 counties will not take legal action when hogs are killed outside of a fence. "Landowners and producers need to know they can address the issue if feral hogs depredate property," Brown says.

"In Missouri, there's very little regulation and no agency has control over the situation, so there are loopholes," Martensen says. "There's a statue [in Missouri] that states it's illegal to release feral hogs; it's a crime—but the consequences are weak."

It's going to take serious funding to provide a long-term solution, Rollins says. "The city called because they [feral hogs] were messing up the golf courses. I said, 'Thank goodness they've moved to town because there's no more room in the country—now the local and state government might take more notice.'"

Feral hogs don't lend themselves to statistical analysis because they mostly emerge at night, but "we need to get a handle on the numbers to handle the situation," Mayer says. "It's one thing to talk about the numbers, though. What matters is the damage the hogs do and what that costs farmers. The $1.5 billion price tag, though a big number, is probably not big enough." FJ

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Web Extra
Go to *www.FarmJournal.com* to learn more about feral hogs and access a county-by-county map.